

TEACHER DISPOSITIONS AND CONTRACT NON-RENEWAL

Abstract

School principals sift through a milieu of data, perceptions, and circumstances to determine which teachers are worthy of contract renewal. This paper provides a review of the research on the role that teacher dispositions play in principals' decision-making regarding contract renewals, as well as a theoretical perspective on the implications for the identification and development of dispositions during teacher induction years. The paper offers practical suggestions to principals regarding which dispositions are most vital, and also offers strategies for principals to influence disposition behavior.

A teacher may hold professional knowledge and or skills but simply not possess the disposition to act. This may manifest itself in behavior such as not grading papers in a timely manner, using unfair grading procedures, disregarding students' special needs, assigning inappropriate homework, failing to consider or allow various viewpoints in the classroom, and acting unethically, dishonestly, or illegally. If the presence of certain dispositions serves to judge a teacher as ineffective and worthy of contract non-renewal, it is a useful exercise to explore the role that school principals have in the assessment of teacher dispositions, particularly during the hiring process. While greater scrutiny of teacher dispositions during the selection process is most effective, the early identification of teacher dispositions may provide the opportunity for appropriate mentoring and guidance during the induction years, including a focused plan for teacher growth and effectiveness.

Some teachers are more effective than others at facilitating student learning (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2007; Marzano, 2006). The literature holds that quality teaching is the crucial component needed for student learning. In fact, the association between teacher quality and student learning is even stronger than the connection between students' socio-economic status and achievement (Wenglinsky, 2002). What is less clear, however, is the role and importance of dispositions in teacher contract non-renewals. School principals are uniquely positioned to monitor, assess, and influence teacher dispositions and performance.

Much of the current interest in dispositions stems from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2009) mandate to incorporate them into teacher candidate assessment. While dispositions are generally recognized as essential components of effective teaching, defining and assessing them is challenging. Dispositions seem intuitive; however

in practice they become vague constructs. At some level, however, dispositions refer to tendencies, inclinations, character, and a temperamental make-up displayed over time. Whitsett, Roberson, Julian, and Beckham (2007) go so far as to state that “dispositions have at least as much power as knowledge and ability for predicting success in the classroom...” (p. 95).

What are Dispositions?

For over seven decades, the importance of teacher candidate dispositions is evident in the literature (Albee & Piveral, 2003). The prevailing view is that effective instruction that leads to student learning requires teacher knowledge, skills, and appropriate dispositions. Due to the limitations of measurement tools, integrating dispositions into teacher education programs has lacked widespread systematic and intentional effort (Albee & Piveral, 2003). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2009) calls dispositions “the values and commitments” that define teacher performance. NCATE standards call for dispositions that are consistent with the idea of “fairness” and “the belief that all students can learn.” Finally, NCATE refers to dispositions as teacher behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities that affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth.

Katz and Rath (1986) provided a useful explanation, calling dispositions “the trend of a teacher’s actions across similar contexts” (p. 2). Wenzlaff (1998) noted that “teacher characteristics, attitudes, conceptions of self, and intellectual and interpersonal dispositions in large measure determine...the curriculum in the classroom” (p. 1). Further review of the literature identifies several descriptors considered indicative of teachers’ dispositions, which include personality traits, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Additional descriptors include “fairness, being democratic, empathy, enthusiasm, thoughtfulness, and respectfulness” (Rike & Sharp, 2008, p. 151). As dispositions are often viewed as beliefs, personal values, and commitments, they may be conceptualized as a moral compass and ethical strand that provide direction to teacher decision-making over time.

Wasicsko (2002) reviewed the earliest disposition literature from the 1960’s and divided teacher categories of perceptions into five groups. According to Wasicsko, these five perception categories differentiate effective teachers from ineffective ones. The perception categories are: 1) perceptions about subject matter, 2) perceptions about self, 3) perceptions about other people, 4) perceptions about the teaching task, and 5) general frame of reference. Essentially Wasicsko is using the terms “dispositions” and “perceptions” interchangeably. Certainly school principals can observe their teacher’s perceptions in these key areas, and likewise during the teacher selection process, to ensure that prospective teacher candidates are satisfactorily inclined in the aforementioned perception/disposition areas.

Another conception of teacher dispositions is that of a reflective practitioner. A mechanically competent teacher falls short of the archetype expert who has developed the desirable intellectual disposition to reflect (Goodlad, 1990). A disposition is more than an attitude, but rather a summary of actions and tendencies that have been observed over time. Further, dispositions are more than habits because they are intentional and consequent of reflection (Katz & Rath, 1986). Dispositions are acts that are chosen in a particular context and at a specific time, and that when called upon require skillful behavior. Or conversely, a disposition may include failing to act or to employ the knowledge or skill that the teacher possesses.

We prefer to view dispositions as the tendency for teachers to act across similar contexts. We believe that these tendencies are at least partly learned and impacted by the teacher's values and belief structure. The school principal is practically and legally positioned to examine these dispositions and tendencies as they unfold in the classroom. A principal who consistently monitors instruction should denote each teacher's "disposition trend" with respect to planning, interactions with students, collegiality, and interest in their own professional growth. This trend provides an open window to the teacher's level of effectiveness with students.

Contract Non-renewal

Teacher contracts are non-renewed most frequently for cause. Typical causes are a lack of skill, inadequate knowledge, or an unacceptable disposition. Common reasons given for teacher contract non-renewal may include excessive absenteeism and tardiness, neglect of duty, abusive language, administering corporal punishment, insubordination, unethical conduct, sexual misconduct, abuse of a controlled substance, theft or fraud, misuse of a school computer, criminal misconduct outside the work setting, and conduct unbecoming a teacher (Lawrence, Vachon, Leake, & Leake, 2005). Dispositions may lead a teacher to behave in a manner consistent with the legally defensible reasons for contract non-renewal. Legal causes for teacher contract non-renewal are typically defined in state statutes, and often include incompetency, insubordination, immorality, good cause, reduction in force, and contract violations.

A study by Nixon, Packard, and Douvanis (2010) investigated reasons for teacher contract non-renewal. A recurring conclusion in that study is the extent to which teacher dispositions are related to criteria that school principals identified as reasons to recommend teacher contract non-renewal. Results indicated that principals cited dispositions as the reason for non-renewal of probationary teachers 53% of the time. The remaining 47% of non-renewals were for reasons related to lack of skill or inadequate content knowledge. While subsequent chi square testing did not indicate significance, there is linkage between teacher contract non-renewal and

teacher dispositions. The study has found that principals' concerns connected to student learning, pedagogy, skill levels, knowledge, or highly qualified status are less important than ethical violations and inappropriate conduct in contract non-renewal questions. However, even though teacher skill and content knowledge areas represented only 33% of the possible answer choices, 47% of principal responses identified them as "high likelihood" reasons for contract non-renewal.

Importance of Dispositions

School principals are expected to provide sustained, effective instructional leadership to their schools. This includes extensive monitoring and evaluation of teacher instruction. Researchers (Fullan, 2001) have described the importance of the school principal in developing culture and capacity. It is within this idea of developing capacity that school principals may have an excellent opportunity to impact teacher dispositions as the school learning culture is developed.

Giovannelli (2003) studied the relationship between a reflective disposition and effective teaching in the classroom. She found that the reflective disposition had a strong, positive influence on effective teaching strategies, especially in the domains of instructional behavior, classroom organization, and teacher expectations. Simply put, she notes that dispositions provide an accurate measure of teacher effectiveness.

Principals face several possibilities regarding teachers and dispositions. First, a particular teacher may lack knowledge of an acceptable disposition. This might be the teacher who does not know any better. A second example is the teacher who may know better, but chooses to act in a non-professional manner and or chooses to not employ an acceptable disposition. This may be the teacher who refuses to allow students to ask questions in class, knowing that they should. This second example teacher might also manifest his/her disposition in the form of dishonest and unethical behavior. In the first example of the teacher who lacks knowledge, the principal has an opportunity to lead the teacher to an understanding of an acceptable disposition. In the latter example, the principal faces a stiffer challenge.

When teachers have the inclination to appropriately apply their dispositions (assuming they possess them), it increases the quality of instruction offered to students. Collinson (1999), Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden (1995), and Collier (2005) found that appropriate teacher dispositions improve student learning opportunities (as cited in Tolar, 2009). Wasicsko (2004) indicated that assessing teacher attitude is probably the single most important strategy that can be implemented to raise student learning. Wasicsko said that "most teachers who do not succeed fail because they do not have the right dispositions" (p. 40). Students can grow and learn when school principals employ and develop teachers with the professional dispositions.

What do desirable, acceptable teacher dispositions look like? Several dispositions come to mind as those which create a necessary foundation for effective teaching. Certainly “empathy” is a disposition that principals can reasonably expect from teachers. Practically speaking, a teacher must be able to put him/herself in the place of the student. Another important disposition for a teacher is some type of a “drive.” Teachers that are continuously searching for new ideas, materials, and experiences make good things happen for students. We suggest that the “drive” is similar to reflective practice. Related to empathy, a “rapport drive” is critical for teachers to be able to develop favorable relationships with students. Rapport is arguably a necessary condition of learning. Teachers who develop, learn, and apply these broad, overarching dispositional areas are on the path to effective teaching.

A concern is that students’ opportunities to learn will be compromised if a teacher’s disposition leads them to being late to class, unprepared for class, unethical, or failing to model professionalism. Unacceptable teacher dispositions manifest themselves in behaviors such as not grading papers in a timely manner, using unfair grading procedures, disregarding students’ special needs, assigning inappropriate homework, and failing to consider or allow various viewpoints. The presence of certain dispositions may serve to judge a teacher as ineffective and worthy of contract non-renewal. Often, principals are required to consider whether the teacher simply lacks the knowledge or skills to be effective, or if the problem is rooted in the teacher’s disposition. If the problem is the latter, the principal faces a larger challenge influencing or modifying the teacher’s behavior.

A highly skilled teacher who does not possess the disposition to answer student questions cannot be considered effective. The essential requirement is to avoid poor dispositions in the practice of teaching itself. Teacher’s personal dispositions are inseparable from the practice of their teaching. Therefore, beliefs that are directly related to teacher capacity and motivation are appropriate for school principals to assess and consider. Knowledge and skills that go unused in the classroom are not acceptable. What use is a skill or knowledge if the teacher does not have the disposition to use it? It is not a question of teacher skills or dispositions, but rather using both as mutually inclusive. Principals need to strongly address the few teachers with unacceptable dispositions who burden the system with demands of time, energy, and with suffering students. In some instances, this will lead to a contract non-renewal.

Influencing Dispositions

The extent to which a school principal may impact dispositions is arguable. Relative stability of human behavior and trends over time increase the challenge to modify teacher dispositions. Difficulty in defining, understanding, and measuring dispositions also limits potential impact.

Often an unacceptable disposition is misdiagnosed as a classroom management issue.

Disposition development mirrors personality development (Damon, 2007). Damon calls dispositions a “deep-seated component of personality going back to the origins of our temperaments...” (p. 367). A reasonable question to pose is whether teacher dispositions (or personality development) are even the business of the school principal? In other words, are dispositions a personal matter, essentially unrelated to performance that should be left out of consideration for contract renewal? We think not. As noted earlier, dispositions are inseparable from teaching practice. At a minimum, teachers can be led to more conscious and thoughtful thinking about how dispositions impact their teaching.

Teacher preparation programs foster awareness and self-critique of a teacher’s dispositions (Yost, 1997). Yost found that pre-service teacher perceptions, beliefs, and awareness can change through effective professional development. This finding partially validates efforts to raise professional development, or critical reflection, and it provides an avenue to reflect on teaching for improvement. While each person may possess certain genetic pre-dispositions, teachers can still be expected to exhibit and to learn specific disposition-related behavior.

Dweck (1989) explores a useful construct of an “entity view” and an “incremental view” of intelligence (as cited in Diez, 2007). The “entity view” sees intelligence as fixed and stable, whereas the incremental view acknowledges the ability to change and grow. As Diez points out, this is useful when considering the development of teacher dispositions. The incremental view holds that helping teachers be more thoughtful about their dispositions, while supporting their development, logically impacts dispositions at some level. It logically follows that strategically devised efforts by school principals to impact teacher dispositions have some impact.

Katz and Rath (1986) make a clear connection between dispositions and the ethos of teacher education programs as having an impact on teacher development. They argue that the ambiance of a program can have a critical impact on the development of teacher candidates. They mention dispositions such as “examination...reflection...study”...among others (p. 304), and each disposition cited is typified by growth, change, and transformation.

One of the school principal’s best opportunities for positive impact on teacher dispositions occurs during the teacher induction period. A comprehensive teacher induction program often includes weekly meetings, ongoing classroom observations, and monthly professional development sessions. Successfully navigating the induction period prepares the teacher for the more advanced stages of development and serves as a bridge between preparation and practice (Bartell, 2005). The literature is clear that during these formative years the principal can influence a teacher to contribute to the learning culture of the school and perhaps alter a

teacher's set of dispositions. Establishing the expectations and building a supportive learning culture offer opportunities for the leadership team to positively impact and raise awareness of teacher dispositions (an incremental view).

Practically speaking, school principals must become more aware of dispositions during the hiring and interview process. Future problems might be avoided if principals place teacher candidates through rigorous interview processes. This includes both the written application and oral interview process. During the application process, principals ought to require candidates to provide very specific written and oral examples of dispositions in action. Probing questions designed to uncover teacher perceptions in critical areas are warranted. An example of a probing question might be something such as "tell me about a time when you developed strong rapport with students. How did you go about doing that?" In evaluating the response, careful attention is paid to determine a candidate's ease with developing rapport with students and to determine the candidate's perception of interacting with students. The use of case studies in interviews would reveal the applicant's effectiveness in a variety of decision-making situations and may reveal core values and beliefs.

One strategy is for the principals to develop a list of disqualifying dispositions to probe at teacher candidate interviews. If the principal detects any hint of these disqualifiers, additional scrutiny is applied. The list of disqualifiers may include things such as being impatient, insensitive, and disrespectful of others, reactive rather than proactive, unwilling to develop rapport with students, not student-centered, dishonest, inflexible, and undependable.

Another course of action is for a school principal to prioritize teacher evaluation processes. The school principal is uniquely positioned to influence and monitor the performance of teachers, but only if the principal summons the time to prioritize teacher growth and development. No other school leader has the legal, legitimate authority and responsibility to ensure quality teachers in the classroom. This responsibility may not be delegated, as no other school administrator may legitimately initiate the process of contract non-renewal. Improving instruction through teacher evaluation is one of the highest value-added strategies a principal may employ. Each time the principal visits a classroom, teacher dispositions are on display.

Teacher growth comes after raising a level of consciousness between intentions and action. This may manifest itself in the initial hiring selection process, professional development sessions, strategic placement on teams, and implementation of policies and procedures, among others. By inducting teachers formally and informally into the school learning culture, dispositions may be positively impacted. As lead learner, the school principal can model several desirable dispositions. As with so many leadership constructs, communication, support, expectations, and follow-through are key.

Conclusions

Pre-service teacher programs primarily emphasize the development of teacher skills, pedagogy, and subject content knowledge. All three areas are each related to teacher contract non-renewal questions. A large challenge for school principals is to accurately assess teacher dispositions. Making the initial teacher selection more effectively will decrease teacher contract non-renewals. Experience reminds us of teachers who have plenty of knowledge with adequate skills, yet flounder due to dispositional issues. The “Wasicsko 20 Minute Hiring Assessment” and other similar teacher disposition instruments (such as the Teacher Perceiver) afford the principal an opportunity to increase the likelihood of selecting the teacher with the right dispositions (Wasicsko, 2004; Young & Delli, 2002). The school principal can impact teacher dispositions by hiring only candidates who pass strenuous scrutiny during the interview process.

Another area of influence is working to build a learning culture in the school. Influencing teacher dispositions reminds us of effective implementation of change theory. Each effort at organizational development, change, and improvement requires that individuals overcome their fears, immunities, and pre-dispositions. Organizational improvement inevitably becomes about personal change. Influencing dispositions may not be too different from transforming culture and providing coherence. Principals who organize teams, are people-centered, display energy and hope, and operate with moral purpose and relationship-building in mind are most likely to impact a teacher's dispositions. Monitoring and evaluating while exploring opportunities for teachers to develop individual growth goals (reflective practice) are strategies worthy of principal attention.

One interesting approach for future research is to identify the principal's own personality, skills, and preferences. We suggest that principals may be influenced by their own emotional needs and preferences. A future study that uncovers the principal's personality type and preferences compared with teachers whose contracts are non-renewed is warranted. In other words, research is needed that will identify whether principals are simply demanding in their teachers what they personally prefer. Research linking and matching teacher contract non-renewal reasons with the principal's personal set of dispositions might provide fascinating insights into teacher success and contract non-renewals.

Continued research vis-à-vis defining, identifying, and measuring teacher dispositions is warranted. Greater refinement of disposition measurement tools will improve the teacher selection process and ultimately lead to better instruction. Better instruction means more students learning, fewer teacher contract non-renewals, increased teacher retention, opportunity to develop stability in personnel and planning for school improvement. Dispositions are the cement that binds heart and mind. While several distinct disposition definitions and limited measurement tools impact

generalizability, assessing teacher dispositions is more than the principal's business—it is his or her responsibility.

Why must school principals attend to teacher dispositions? First, future problems may be avoided if due diligence is applied up front during the teacher selection process. Secondly, dispositions are related to teacher effectiveness and student learning. Focusing on teacher dispositions can lead to more students learning now. Third, focusing on dispositions creates opportunities to identify value-added professional learning and improvement of school culture. Finally, noticing and consciously attending to dispositions creates a culture that is needed to promote student learning. This is the essential work of the school principal.

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